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ABSTRACT

The Experimental Intensive Freshmen Advising Program, which was developed to help high-risk freshmen succeed at a small, four-year liberal arts college, was evaluated. The voluntary, one-semester program is based on humanistic and behavioral principles and incorporates weekly, group meetings with a freshman peer advisor and a faculty adviser, test anxiety workshops, assessment of study and learning modes and needed changes, and group activities to improve feelings of belonging and self-esteem. Students with marginal academic backgrounds were identified based on high school rank and scholastic aptitude test (SAT) performance: combined SAT scores of 789.7 and 826 for the 1979 and 1980 classes, respectively. The control groups, which did not participate in the program, were students accepted during the years 1973-1978 with a combined mean SAT score of 867.6 (five-year control group); and a nonequivalent control group of 1980 students who had combined SAT scores about 75 points higher than program participants. Compared to the five-year and nonequivalent control groups, program participants had significantly higher grade point averages after one semester, after completion of two academic years, and upon graduation. The percentage of participants who persisted to graduation slightly exceeded the college average. (SW)

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Applying Humanistic and Behavioral Principles to Assist High-Risk Freshmen

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Running Head: APPLYING HUMANISTIC AND BEHAVIORAL PRINCIPLES TO ASSIST HIGH-RISK FRESHMEN

Abstract

A voluntary positive preventative one-semester program utlizing humanisitc and behavioral principles was designed to enhance the probability of college success for students with marginal academic backgrounds. A longitudinal analysis indicated that significantly higher grade point averages were obtained after one semester, after completion of two academic years, and upon graduation when compared to a five-year control group and a non-equivalent control group that had combined Scholastic Aptitude Test scores approximately 75 points higher than the experimental group. In addition, the percentage of graduates from the experimental program slightly exceeded the college average. The implications of these findings for other schools are also discussed.

Applying Humanistic and Behavioral Principles to Assist High-Risk Freshmen

The vast majority of colleges and universities in this country apply various screening criteria to applicants to their colleges. It is assumed that certain applicants are not "college material" or are not capable of succeeding in the particular academic environment to which they are applying. These applicants are refused admission. However, the cut-offs are not hard and fast. In other words, there is a great deal of subjectivity involved in the admissions process. In addition, there exists at every college and university a group of students who barely meet admissions standards. Or on a given year, they don't meet the standards and are admitted anyway because of the slower or lower than usual number of students choosing that college. What is a college experience like for these students? Obviously, just because they have been accepted does not mean that they are equally well prepared to benefit or to take advantage of the college experience. Their previous educational experiences have been qualitatively different than the vast majority of their fellow freshmen. Yet most colleges and universities treat these students

uniformly and in a similar fashion. In fact, they will resist acknowledging the huge individual differences in aptitude, motivation, previous experiences, work habits and self-concepts. Once admitted, all freshmen are equal or so they are told. These students are misled into thinking and feeling that they have an equal chance to succeed in this environment, when in fact they don't. Specifically, the question that this research addresses is, could a specially designed program that takes into account the above improve the chances for college success for these students?

Subjects

There were three different classifications of students who were identified and participated. The Admissions Director of a small, four-year liberal arts college in Eastern Pennsylvania identified five subgroups of students who were the most marginal acceptances over the years 1973 to 1978, using a combination of high school class rank and scholastic aptitude test performance (combined mean average S.A.T. = 867.6). These 87 students became the five-year control group.

In addition, the 13 most marginal acceptances for the 1979 class were identified (combined S.A.T. = 789.7)

and invited to participate in the Experimental Intensive Freshmen Advising Program. These students became the first experimental group. The following academic year, another group of ten of the most marginal acceptances for the 1980 class was identified (combined mean S.A.T. = 826) and these students became the second experimental group.

Lastly, 23 additional students from the 1979 class were identified (combined S.A.T. = 877.4) with comparable high school class rank to the first experimental group and used as a non-equivalent control group. A second non-equivalent control group of twelve students from the 1980 class (combined mean S.A.T. = 889) was also chosen. Because of their better S.A.T. scores, these groups were considered less marginal than the experimental groups. They did not participate in the Experimental Intensive Freshmen Advising Program. However, they did participate in the regular freshmen advising program.

All students were single, of traditional college age, had entered college directly out of high school and were enrolled as full-time maticulated students.

Procedure

The Experimental Intensive Freshmen Advising Program was developed to enhance the probability of college success for students with marginal backgrounds. The program was designed to reflect a positive, preventative, humanistic/behavioral orientation that was integrated into the first semester of the freshmen year experience. The three inter-related domains of the programs incorporated social-psychological variables, academic skill training and promotion of college involvement, as well as negotiation of behavioral change.

The freshmen met weekly in a group format for two to three hours with their freshmen peer advisor and faculty advisor who designed the agenda for each weekly meeting. Participation by the students was completely voluntary. Representative modules included a five-week test anxiety workshop, assessment of current mode of studying and learning, identification of specific behavioral change necessary to improve study habits, and a variety of group activities aimed at promoting feelings of belonging, personal worth, self-concept and self-esteem. The overall focus of the total program was to aid these

students in meeting the reality of the challenging task before them with the help of the supportive trusting group.

Results or Findings

There were no significant differences in grade point averages for the first semester, for the first academic year, or for the final grade point average between the two experimental groups. Thus, for the purpose of analyzing the data, these two groups were collapsed into a single experimental group (EFAP). The two non-equivalent control groups also did not significantly differ and were collapsed into a single group (NECG), as were the five subgroups of control subjects (5YCG).

The mean cumulative grade point average after the first semester, after the first year, and at the end of the college experience for each group was: 5YCG 1.73, 1.72 and 1.92; NECG 1.97, 1.96, and 2.03; and EFAP 2.50, 2.45 and 2.38. An analysis of variance for each comparison indicated a significant EFAP effect, F (2,139) = 10.21, $p < .001$; F (2,139) = 10.85, $p < .001$; and F (2,139) = 3.50, $p < .05$ in each case respectively.

A retention percentage for each group was computed

by dividing the number of students who graduated from the college within five years by the total number of students in each group. The following percentages were obtained: EFAP, 68.2%, NECG, 54.3% and 5YCG, 47.1%.

Implications and Conclusions

The results document the success of the program. Not only were final grades significantly higher for the experimental group, but also a higher percentage of them graduated from the college. In fact, the overall college retention figure has ranged from 58% to 64% in previous years. The implications are clear that a positive, preventative, intensive counseling program has a tremendous payoff.

Unfortunately, at many institutions, it is only at the end of the first semester that academic counseling services really swing into action to try to help students cope. For many of them, it is already too late. The first semester averages for each of the five subgroups of the control sample were remarkably consistent and poor: 1.60, 1.74, 1.78, 1.67 and 1.78 respectively. Approximately two thirds of the 5YCG students found themselves on academic probation at the end of their

first semester. Colleges are now seen as more of the same as high school. The self-perceptions are solidified (low expectations, little motivation) and the poor work and study habits have been transferred to the new environment and become part of the problem to overcome. What happens to that young individual who comes in ill equipped, ill prepared and fails? How much damage has been done to that person's self-concept? What are his/her attitudes toward higher education and how likely is it that that individual will try to succeed in the academic environment again? Any college, regardless of its standards, has its marginal acceptances who could benefit from such an experimental intensive program, all all colleges should consider implementing such a program.